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INTELLIGENCE MEMORANDUM

RECENT TRENDS IN TRUCK TRAFFIC ON SELECTED ROUTES IN COMMUNIST-HELD PARTS OF LAOS

DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE
Office of Research and Reports

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WARNING

This material contains information affecting the National Defense of the United States within the meaning of the espionage laws, Title 18, USC, Secs. 793 and 794, the transmission or revelation of which in any manner to an unauthorized person is prohibited by law.

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FOREWORD

Recent trends in truck traffic in Communist-held parts of Laos and the relationship of this traffic to the logistic support intended for Communist military forces in Laos and possibly for the Viet Cong in South Vietnam are presented in this memorandum. The analysis of the truck traffic is based on information received from road-watch teams and other ground observers in Laos and North Vietnam. Information obtained from aerial reconnaissance regarding the condition of the roads and bridges has been included whenever appropriate.

This memorandum updates two previous reports on this subject, CIA/RR [redacted], Analysis of Truck Traffic on Selected Routes in North Vietnam and Laos, October 1964, [redacted] and CIA/RR [redacted] Truck Traffic on Selected Roads in North Vietnam and Laos During November 1964, December 1964, [redacted]

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RECENT TRENDS IN TRUCK TRAFFIC
ON SELECTED ROADS IN COMMUNIST-HELD PARTS OF LAOS*

Summary

According to reports from road-watch teams and other ground observers, during January 1965 a comparatively high level of truck traffic moved on certain strategic roads in Laos -- especially on the section of route 12 that leads to the Nhommarath-Mahaxay area and on route 23, which leads to southern Laos. Traffic on routes 12 and 23 probably reflected an increase in supplies needed for the large number of Communist troops that moved from North Vietnam into Laos during December 1964 over both of these roads. The movement of these troops into Laos coincided with the reopening of route 23 to truck traffic for the first time since May.

In January and early February, traffic reported on a key section of route 23 was much greater than the level reported before the rainy season. The trucks moved mainly at night, and for the most part they were reported to have carried "unidentified cargo." It is believed that these trucks arrived on route 23 from North Vietnam via route 12 and that they traveled south to the Muong Phine - Tchepone (Sépone) area on route 9. However, observers on route 12 near the North Vietnamese border and other observers farther south on route 23 near route 9 did not observe the same high level of traffic. Apparently the trucks were not counted by these observers, because the observers were absent from the road during much of the nighttime. There seems to be no reason why the majority of the trucks moving south did not proceed at least to route 9, probably to Muong Phine and Tchepone, unless new military storage areas, of which there is no present knowledge, have been established on route 23.

If most of the trucks that were reported on the one section of route 23 had carried supplies, however, they could have carried enough to support 10,000 to 15,000 troops compared with the 7,600 Communist troops that were estimated to be in the area served by this road during the first half of 1964.** If there are fewer than 10,000 to 15,000 troops in the area, the Communists could be building up their stock of heavy weapons in the area, and they could be stockpiling supplies or infiltrating them over trails to South Vietnam. There is support for all of these suppositions.

The average number of trucks reported moving on route 7 in Laos during December 1964 was slightly lower than that observed in October and November, but the January average returned to about the same level.

* The estimates and conclusions in this memorandum represent the best judgment of this Office as of 19 February 1965.

** Assuming the troops were consuming supplies at the rate estimated for troops located in southern Laos before the rainy season in 1964.

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During December and January and during the first few days in February, however, observation shifted from one location to another and back again, making it difficult to compare the level of traffic with that of previous months.

Photographic analysis shows that the Communists apparently have been able to move trucks in spite of the bridges that were bombed recently on route 7 and that they continue to bypass bridges that were damaged earlier on other routes. Although aerial reconnaissance occasionally detects trucks during daylight hours on the roads in North Vietnam, high-level and low-level reconnaissance has revealed very few trucks on the roads in Laos during daylight hours.

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I. Route 23*

Truck traffic on route 23 to southern Laos resumed in December 1964 for the first time since May, when heavy rains washed out a bridge and destroyed parts of the road. During the latter part of December a large volume of traffic moved south, and since then traffic has continued at the fairly steady pace of about 30 trucks moving both ways per day on days that the road was observed.**

About 170 trucks, 120 of which reportedly carried soldiers, moved south during 20 to 22 December past a point just below route 12. These trucks are believed to have continued moving south past a point near the junction with route 9, inasmuch as a road-watch team about 50 kilometers (km) north of route 9 reported hearing traffic moving continuously at night during 23 to 26 December. In addition to the troops on the trucks, about 2,500 troops (reportedly Pathet Lao and Vietnamese Communists) were observed walking south on route 23 at a point just below route 12 during 16 to 18 December. It is estimated that a total of at least 4,000 to 5,000 troops moved south into the Muong Phine - Tchepone area during December.

On 22 days of coverage during January, observers about 50 km south of the junction with route 12 counted a total of 337 trucks moving south and 324 trucks moving north. During the first 3 days of February, traffic continued at about the same average daily rate computed for January. Nearly all of the trucks moved at night. The number counted each night varied from none up to 80 during 1 night. Their cargo was not identified except for the observation that some of the trucks moving north carried lumber, bamboo, empty gasoline drums, and tires. A few trucks moving south were said to have carried wooden boxes, and three others towed one 122-millimeter howitzer each.

Presumably the trucks observed moving south continued onto route 9, but observers on route 23, about 50 km north of route 9, reported seeing a total of only 127 trucks. These teams observed the road from at least one point on all but 1 day during 1 to 22 January, but apparently they did not continue the observation throughout the nights. Examination of aerial photography of route 23 between routes 12 and 9 indicates that the road is in good condition throughout. There seems to be no reason, therefore, why the trucks moving south did not proceed at least to route 9, probably to Muong Phine and Tchepone, unless new military storage areas, of which there is no present knowledge, have been established on route 23.

The level of traffic on route 23 reported for January 1965 -- about 30 trucks per day moving both ways on 22 days of observation -- is

* For this and other routes in Laos, see the map, Figure 1, inside back cover.

** Total number of trucks observed divided by the number of days covered by reports. For additional data, see the table, p. 9, below.

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considerably higher than that reported before the rainy season in 1964. During April 1964, traffic averaged six trucks per day on the 15 days that the road was observed, and during May it averaged seven trucks per day on the 29 days that the road was observed. It should be noted, however, that the comparison between traffic observed during January 1965 and the traffic before the rainy season may not be valid. Observation of the road during April 1964 occurred on comparatively few days, and traffic during May could have been lighter than during previous months because the rain had already begun, although the road was passable until the latter part of the month.

The pattern of traffic observed on route 23 since the route was reopened during December 1964 indicates that the Communists probably are using about 110 trucks (but possibly as many as 160 trucks) on the route and that these trucks made a round trip about every 10 days. If the number of trucks was 110 and each one carried 2 to 3 short tons, they could deliver between 600 and 1,000 short tons per month to the Muong Phine - Tchepone area. Assuming that troops in southern Laos are consuming supplies at the rate estimated for the first half of 1964, this amount of supplies is sufficient to support between 10,000 and 15,000 men, a somewhat larger number than the 7,600 men who were estimated to be in the area served by this road during the first half of 1964. If there are fewer than 10,000 to 15,000 men in the area, one may conclude that the surplus of supplies is being stockpiled in the area or that it is being infiltrated over trails to the Viet Cong in South Vietnam. It is possible, however, that some of the trucks carried advanced ordnance rather than routine military supplies. At least 40 antiaircraft guns were sighted recently in photography of the Muong Phine area. Moreover, the recent capture of new, advanced ordnance of Chinese Communist manufacture in South Vietnam tends to support the supposition that some of this cargo was intended for infiltration into South Vietnam.

II. Route 12 Between Routes 23 and 8

The section of route 12 west of the junction with route 23 was observed daily during December and January. Traffic during the first part of December consisted of only a few trucks each day, as it had during October and November. During the latter part of December, however, a large group of trucks was observed going to the Nhommarath-Mahaxay area. Almost all of the 167 trucks observed during 16 to 31 December were headed west. About half of these trucks carried troops (estimated to be as many as 1,650 men), about 30 of the trucks carried heavy military equipment, and one group of 55 trucks carried rice. This is the first time such a large number of troops has been reported moving west since April 1963, when about 1,000 troops reportedly moved west during 11 to 20 April. This is also the first report of such large quantities of heavy weapons, although small numbers of howitzers have been observed in the past.

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During January 1965 a road-watch team on the same section of route 12, about 10 km west of the junction with route 23, reported a total of 96 trucks moving west and 86 moving east. The contents of many of the trucks were not identified, but 41 of those moving west reportedly carried cargo and 15 carried about 300 troops. Of those moving east, 54 reportedly carried unidentified cargo and 12 carried a total of about 120 troops. The majority of the trucks moved during the hours of darkness, but a 15-truck convoy was seen at 1100 hours on 14 January. Except for a 30-truck convoy, the trucks moved in small groups of 7 to 15 trucks. The traffic during the first 14 days of February appeared to be moving in about the same manner, although possibly at a lower level.

Traffic on this section of route 12 averaged seven trucks moving both ways per day during December and six during January. This level is more than double the average of two or three trucks observed in June through November 1964. However, the average number of trucks observed in April and May 1964 was nine and seven, respectively, for those days that the road was observed. Furthermore, occasional large convoys are not unusual on this route. During 1963 and during March through May 1964, traffic consisted of a few trucks each way per day supplemented by one or two large convoys of 30 to 100 trucks per month. Comparison with traffic during December 1963 and January 1964 is not possible, for no reports from road-watch teams are available for those months.

III. Route 12 Between the North Vietnam Border and Route 23*

The section of route 12 between the border of North Vietnam and the junction with route 23 is the only all-season truckable route that the Communists use to supply their forces in southern Laos. The men and supplies that are moved over this route probably are brought to Vinh by railroad or coastal vessel and then are trucked south on route 1 to Ha Tinh and then southwest into Laos on route 12. From the junction of routes 12 and 23, where a small rest, refueling, and supply area is located, the trucks either move south on route 23 during the months that the road is usable or continue west on route 12.

This key section of route 12 north of the junction with route 23 was observed during part of each day in the first half of December, in January, and in the first half of February, but, unfortunately, it apparently was not observed from about 2130 hours until about sunrise, the hours during which the largest number of trucks has been observed moving on route 23 and farther west on route 12. Similarly, during the latter part of December, when the road was not observed, the large convoys that were observed later on the routes farther west and south probably went south along this section of route 12. On the 16 days that the road was observed during 1 to 17 December, a total

* Data for this section of route 12 are not included in the table, p. 9, below.

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of only 28 trucks was observed. During January a total of 154 trucks was reported going south and 121 going north, mostly during the early evening hours. The cargo in the southbound trucks could not be identified, and the northbound trucks were said to be empty. Most of the trucks were observed traveling in small groups, but one convoy of 51 trucks and 3 convoys with about 15 to 25 trucks each were observed.

The road also was observed on every day during 1 to 18 February. During this period a total of 188 trucks reportedly moved south, and 38 moved north. About one-half of the trucks moved in five convoys of about 15 to 30 trucks each. About 1,200 North Vietnamese troops were reported accompanying the convoys both on foot and in the trucks. The cargo in the southbound trucks was not identified except for those carrying troops, and the northbound trucks were said to be empty.

IV. Route 7

Traffic on route 7 has continued in spite of destroyed bridges. The lack of consistent observation of the route, however, makes it difficult to compare the level of traffic with that of previous months. The number of trucks observed during December 1964 and January 1965 moving past points about 10 km west of Ban Ban appeared to be lower than that observed in October and November 1964. On 16 days of coverage during 1 to 19 December and on 8 days during 24 to 31 January, a total of 264 trucks was observed moving west and of 193 moving east past these points. Reports for 4 days in February show 48 trucks moving west and 8 east. Except for one convoy of 40 trucks, the trucks traveled in small groups of no more than 30 each. Almost all of the trucks traveled at night, and usually their cargo was not identified.

Traffic on route 7, which was observed from an area east of Ban Ban on 9 days during 12 to 24 December and 8 days during 9 to 29 January, also appeared lower than that observed in October and November. This is the first time in recent months that more than scattered reports have been available for this section of route 7. During December and January a total of 341 trucks was reported moving west toward Ban Ban and of 228 moving east from Ban Ban. Convoys ranged in size from about 10 to 70 trucks, and several of the larger convoys were seen moving in the morning or late afternoon. No cargo was reported for any of the trucks.

The daily average of the total number of trucks reported moving both ways per day on the days that route 7 was observed was 28 in December and 33 in January. The December figure is lower than the averages of 33 and 34 in October and November, respectively, but the January average of 33 is about the same as those for October and November. Reports for 4 days in February show an average of 14 trucks moving both ways per day. These data may not be consistent, however, because it was not until in December and January that the first significant reporting

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from east of Ban Ban occurred, whereas reporting from west of Ban Ban ceased for more than 1 month. Previously all reports with one or two exceptions were from an area west of Ban Ban.

Moreover, the data for December and January may not be significant, because large numbers of trucks could have moved when the road was not under observation. In the area west of Ban Ban, there were no road-watch teams during the period 20 December to 23 January, and east of Ban Ban there have been no road-watch reports since 20 December, although Laotian self-defense units observed the road on 23 and 24 December and from 9 to 29 January.* The lack of observations by road-watch teams may be due to the enemy's patrolling of the road, which forced the teams away from the road. Such patrolling is believed to have occurred in the past when large numbers of trucks were moving on the road.

Observation of route 7 within North Vietnam** also was made from a point about 45 km from the border. During 6 to 9 January, observers counted 62 trucks moving west and 67 moving east during daylight hours. The observers, however, stated that more trucks than the number they actually counted moved day and night. The trucks observed moving west carried soldiers and rice, and most of those moving east carried only two soldiers each.

The Ban Ken highway bridge about 10 km east of Ban Ban was completely destroyed by an airstrike on 13 January 1965, and another smaller bridge to the east of the Ban Ken bridge was partly destroyed. Photography of the Ban Ken bridge taken on 16 January reveals a detour from the west and an apparent ford 100 yards north of the bridge. Both the detour and the ford show signs of use.***

V. Route 8

Although there have been no reports on route 8 from ground observers since April 1964, at least part of the route appears to be open to traffic. Analysis of aerial photography early in December showed tracks at a ford built to bypass the destroyed Nape highway bridge, indicating that it was in use early in December. Also, T-28 pilots reported sighting five trucks on route 8 southwest of Nape on 21 January 1965.

VI. Route 9

There are several indications that route 9 is being used by trucks, although road-watch teams have not observed the road since early September 1964. Laotian T-28 pilots claim that the road is becoming deeply rutted from heavy truck traffic. Recent detailed photographic

* These units observed the road from high ground 11 km north of the road during the daytime from 13 to 29 January.

** Traffic within North Vietnam is not included in the table, p. 9, below.

*** See the photographs, Figures 2 and 3, inside back cover.

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analysis has revealed fresh tracks near the supply complex of Ban Thay, which is only a few kilometers northeast of Muong Phine. The photographs suggest that its facilities and probably those at Muong Phine are being dispersed in the woods farther from the road rather than being dismantled as was previously indicated. Also, a Laotian T-28 pilot saw evidence near Tchepone of a new site for helicopters.

Photographic analysis has shown that a ford and a connecting bypass road were constructed in late November to circumvent the bombed bridge on route 9 that is about 15 km west of Muong Phine. Analysis also has shown that construction of a ford around the Tchepone bridge about 3 km northwest of Tchepone was well underway soon after the bridge was damaged by an airstrike on 28 January.*

* See the photograph, Figure 4, inside back cover.

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Analysis of Truck Traffic Reported by Ground Observers on Selected Routes in Laos a/
Selected Months, 1963-65

Route Number, Month, and Year	Number of Trucks Reported Moving			Maximum Number of Trucks Moving in Any 1 Day		Number of Days Covered by Reports	Average Number of Trucks Moving per Day <u>b/</u>
	West or South	East or North	Total	West or South	East or North		
Route 7 <u>c/</u>							
December 1963	80	110	190	60	110	4	48
October 1964	579	150	729	116	55	22	33
November 1964	381	127	508	120	50	15	34
December 1964	409	126	535	93	45	19	28
January 1965	196	295	491	50	90	15	33
February (1 through 5) 1965	48	8	56	26	8	4	14
Route 12 between routes 23 and 8 <u>d/</u>							
October 1964	23	33	56	6	6	30	2
November 1964	51	37	88	10	4	30	3
December 1964 <u>e/</u>	176	27	203	55	8	31	7
January 1965	96	86	182	15	30	31	6
February (1 through 14) 1965	28	47	75	13	11	14	5
Route 23 <u>d/</u>							
October 1964			0			31	
November 1964			0			30	
December 1964	188	18	206	100	12	31	7
January 1965	337	324	661	80	50	22	30
February (1 through 3) 1965	45	40	85	25	30	3	28

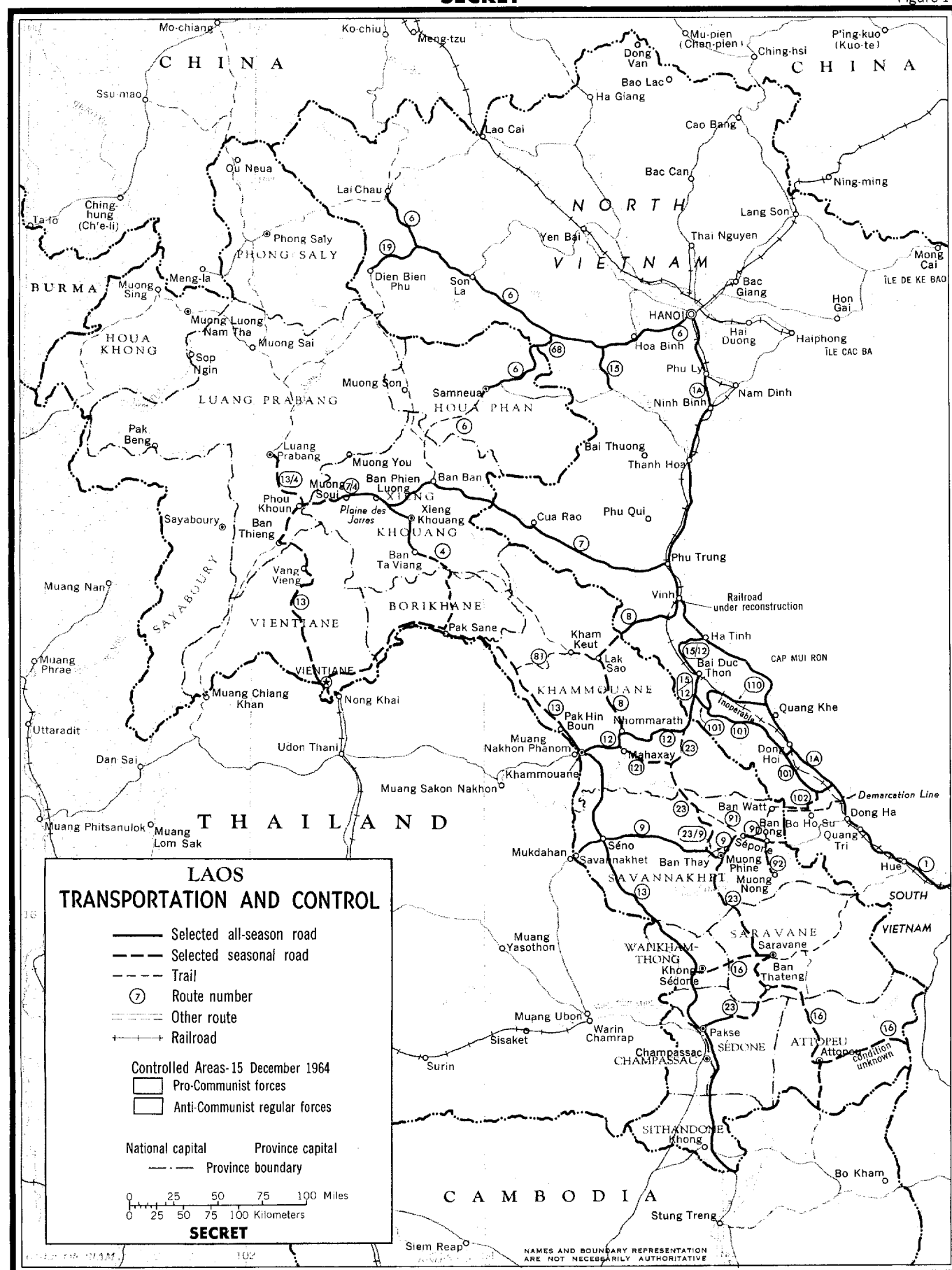
a. Based on road-watch traffic reports. Data may include double counting if the trucks passed more than one observation post along the route. Such duplication has been eliminated whenever possible.

b. Total number of trucks observed divided by the number of days covered by reports.

c. Reports are not available for January 1964.

d. Reports are not available for December 1963 and January 1964.

e. Including observations through 1000 hours on 1 January 1965.



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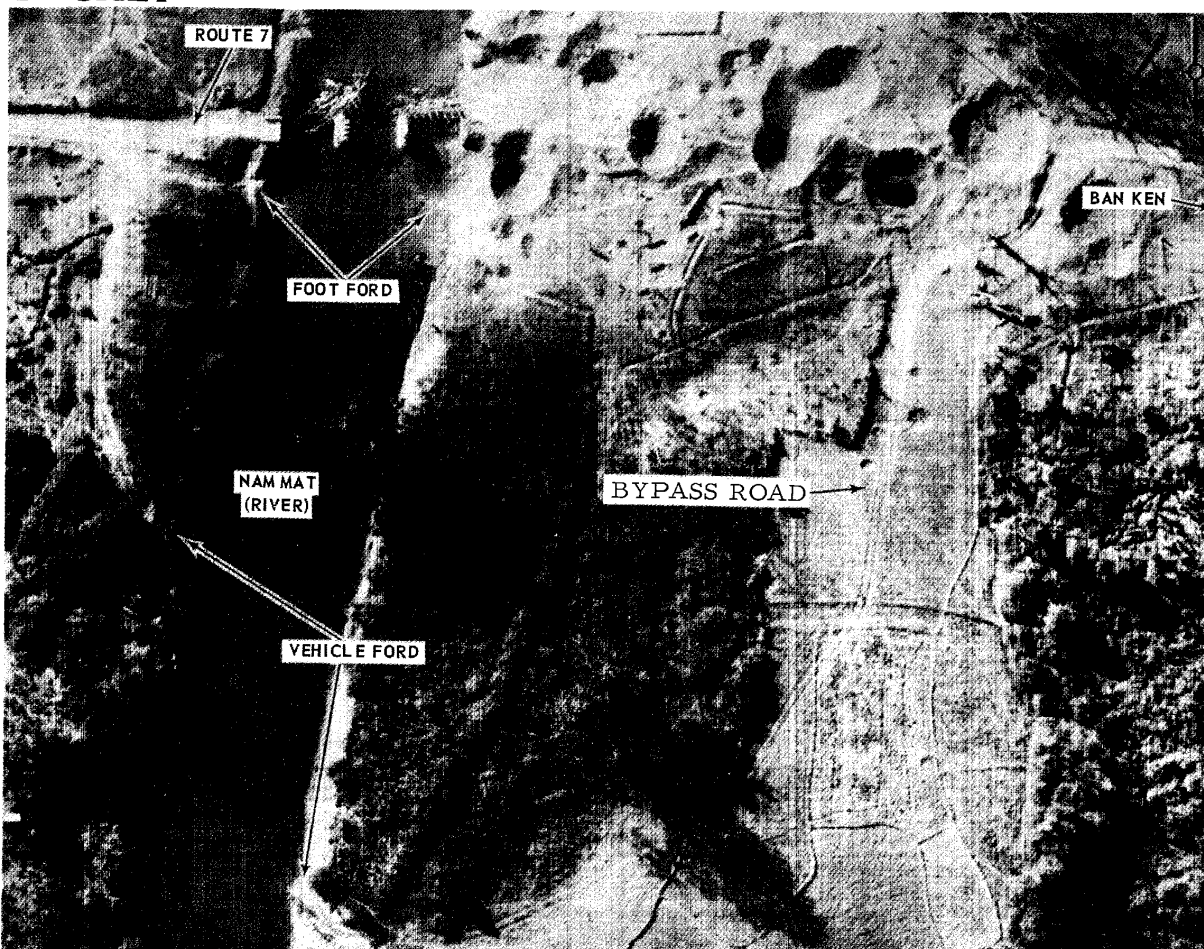


Figure 2. Laos: Ban Ken Highway Bridge Over Nam Mat, 16 January 1965.
Fords are being used to bypass the destroyed bridge.

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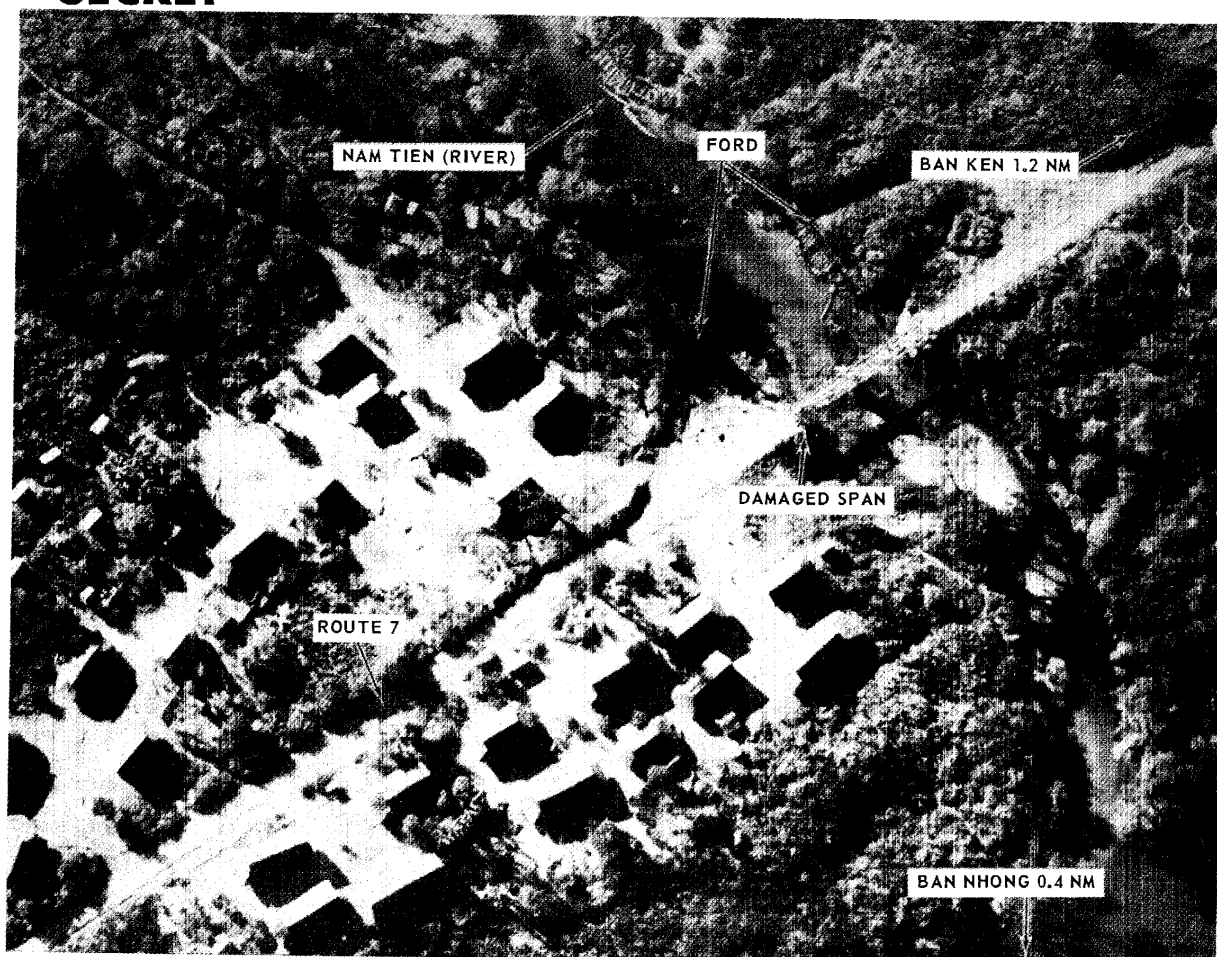


Figure 3. Laos: Ban Nhong Highway Bridge Over Nam Tien, 16 January 1965.
A ford is being used to bypass the damaged bridge.

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Figure 4. Laos: Tchepone Highway Bridge Over Se Bang Hieng, 5 February 1965. The part of the bridge marked "destroyed span" was damaged in an airstrike on 28 January 1965. This photograph, taken 1 week later, shows a ford under construction.

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